

## PENTHOUSE INTERVIEW

# BOB GUCCIONE

Comparing an X-rated film to *Caligula* is like comparing the shootout at the O.K. Corral to the Second World War.

**I**t is difficult to imagine what the citizens of Rome thought in 1976 when they saw the odd goings-on at the Dear Film Studios just outside that city. According to local gossip, there were some interesting events transpiring: a lot of people were walking around undressed and half-dressed, a menagerie of animals (including Tibetan goats) was being brought inside the studios, and a small army of workmen were building Roman baths, a complete Roman palace, and an underground grotto for what appeared to be an authentic imperial Roman orgy.

The neighbors of the Dear Studios had some experience with film extravagance, of course—the Taylor-Burton *Cleopatra* film had been shot there, with all its attendant controversy—but, as everybody finally discovered, there was no precedent for the latest series of events. For 18 months the studios were occupied with the filming of *Caligula*, a controversial \$17.5 million-plus epic on the short but memorable reign of the infamous Roman Caesar.

The rumors surrounding the filming turn out to be true: the recently opened film is one of the most talked about in modern cinema history—and one of the most controversial. Lots of beautiful naked women. Lush (and graphic) sex scenes. Stunning sets. Wild Roman orgies. Painfully realistic violence. Awesome visuals. An uncensored spectacle of imperial politics in the Eternal City.

In other words, the first accurate film portrayal of what life was really like in pagan Rome—which is precisely the crux of *Caligula* and the source of its controversy. For its producers, Bob Guccione and Franco Rossellini, *Caligula* is intended as a breakthrough film, a serious attempt to reconstruct life in imperial Rome as seen by historians of that period. Sometimes described as the first “fusion” film—a fusion of establishment cinema with underground film techniques—*Caligula* is, in terms of realism, light-years ahead of anything else ever attempted in that area.

Controversy has dogged *Caligula* from the moment the first frame was shot. The controversy rests not only on the film's explicitness but also on a running series of disputes

and disruptions among the people who made the film. They include a raging argument between the film's original director and the screenwriter (since the screenwriter was Gore Vidal, it's worthy of more than a footnote), virtual war between the film's chief producer and the director (which resulted in the firing of that director), squabbles among the actors and the Academy Award-winning set designer, and a whole series of other skirmishes.

How the movie was ever completed remains a minor miracle. But those internecine series of battles on the set by now have been overshadowed by the large public controversy over the movie's content. *Caligula* opened late last year, first in Italy where it was closed, albeit temporarily, by the authorities after it had played only six days, on the grounds that it was “morally offensive”—despite earlier clearance by the Italian censors. Whether similar problems will affect the movie in this and other countries remains to be seen, for despite the battalions of extras, a detailed attention to historical accuracy, a big-name cast (Peter O'Toole, Malcolm McDowell, Sir John Gielgud), the talk about *Caligula* has focused almost exclusively on its explicit sexual content. The film's producers insist that *Caligula* is not pornography, an insistence they had underscored by refusing to submit the picture to the Motion Picture Association for rating. Since the M.P.A., they argue, would certainly give the picture an X rating, it would mean that *Caligula* would be written off with the customary effluvia of the porn market.

But *Caligula*'s well-deserved reputation for sexual explicitness is sure to generate new controversy, X rating or not. In part, the controversy has been fueled by a continuing series of statements by the movie's participants, who are still arguing about it. In an attempt to get to the bottom of the controversy, *Penthouse* assigned regular contributor Ernest Volkman to interview the central figure in the making of the movie—Bob Guccione. Volkman, who has followed the progress of *Caligula* nearly from its inception, talked with Guccione about the movie during a series of conversations in New York and London.

**Penthouse:** Sir John Gielgud, one of the world's most distinguished actors, was quoted in a recent interview as saying, "I've just finished my first pornographic film, called *Caligula*." Do you think that's a fair description of the film?

**Guccione:** Given the relatively sheltered life that Gielgud has lived, in terms of motion pictures, and his exposure to what's happening in the avant-garde, I would say that he was right, but only if judged in the context of his own experience and information.

**Penthouse:** But not so far as what you conceive to be the overall purpose of the film? In other words, you're saying you did not set out to make a pornographic film?

**Guccione:** No. I don't see the film as being pornographic, and I certainly didn't set out to make a pornographic movie. It's a question of definitions. To me, pornography is a work of bad art, as opposed to good art. And I don't think that *Caligula* qualifies under the heading of bad art. It was a huge commercial undertaking, and at the same time we wanted to make a serious statement. We've done with cinematic images what so many authors and historians have done with words—we have re-created a complex life-style that flourished before Christ and the Judeo-Christian philosophy came into being.

**Penthouse:** Nevertheless, this film will have an X rating, correct?

**Guccione:** No, the film won't have any rating at all. We're not submitting it to the M.P.A., because they can only give it an "X," and an X rating would be demeaning and unfair to *Caligula*. The conventional connotation is still the \$100,000 made-in-a-motel epic, and that, next to *Caligula*, is like a street rumble next to the Second World War. The film has all the customary requirements and caveats for sexually explicit cinematic material. You'll have to be 18 years or older to be able to see it. But it does not have an X rating—we've given it our own rating: an M.A., for mature audiences.

**Penthouse:** The film's reputation for explicitness has already attracted a considerable amount of controversy, although it seems that much of the controversy also has to do with the film's graphic violence. Do you think the controversy arises from the sex scenes or the violence?

**Guccione:** The fact that we have used celebrated movie personalities to make a film with sexually explicit passages is probably the source of the controversy. People talk about the violence, of course, but it's easier and more sophisticated to say that you're shocked by the violence rather than the sex.

**Penthouse:** Originally, reports about *Caligula* suggested that the movie would finally cost somewhere in the neighborhood of \$16 million. How accurate is that figure?

**Guccione:** The final cost of the film comes in at a little over \$17.5 million. But

if you take into consideration interest on money—which, for accounting purposes, is not only proper but necessary—it will come in at around \$22 million. That's quite a staggering sum to make an "obscene film." That is why I say that if it was our intention to make an obscene film, we certainly wouldn't have spent that kind of money. For that kind of money, I could have made over 200 porno films.

**Penthouse:** Rumor has it that you put up the entire amount yourself in cash. Is that true?

**Guccione:** Yes.

**Penthouse:** Is that the first time any one individual has put up that much money to bankroll a film?

**Guccione:** I believe so.

**Penthouse:** But weren't you taking on an enormous gamble or—let me put it this way—an excessive, even reckless gamble?

**Guccione:** Perhaps, but no one else was prepared to help or to participate financially.

**Penthouse:** What about conventional film-funding sources or advances from territorial sales?

**Guccione:** No one wanted to know—not when they read the script, that is. Everyone had a problem with censorship.

**Penthouse:** So you're in this all alone?

**Guccione:** Completely.

**Penthouse:** The critics' reaction to *Caligula* has not been exactly kind. Does that bother you at all?

**Guccione:** Not really. I anticipated their reaction exactly and prepared for it, mentally as well as materially.

**Penthouse:** How do you prepare for such a thing materially?

**Guccione:** For one thing, you avoid the constant little masturbatory rituals of wining and dining them throughout the production; you keep them away from the set, away from the actors and the crew; you forbid anyone to talk to them, and you don't circulate handouts, press releases, or production stills.

**Penthouse:** You're talking about a complete press blackout. Isn't that dangerous? Weren't you fearful of being ignored completely?

**Guccione:** I didn't think of it in those terms. As an editor and journalist myself, I knew that such an action would intrigue them, heighten their curiosity, and provoke them to chase every little bit of rumor and speculation that a film like *Caligula*, produced by a company like Penthouse, would generate. The tighter we clamped down on security, the more they wrote. Rumors—in some cases bordering on lunacy—were rampant. There was talk of bestiality, girls screwing horses and dogs, nonstop orgies involving hundreds of people, animals being slain on camera, children being sexually violated while their parents were present and looking on, et cetera, et cetera.

**Penthouse:** Didn't that disturb you? Wasn't that a way of encouraging or conditioning them to view the final product in

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an even more prejudicial light?

**Guccione:** Perhaps. I knew *Caligula* would generate a lot of controversy, and I didn't want to lose the impetus it would ultimately cause at the box office. In other words, I wanted to save the real surprises for the right psychological moment . . . I didn't want all the excitement and speculation to die before the film was ready to play.

**Penthouse:** Why were you so convinced you'd get bad press? In the beginning it appeared that you had all the right ingredients: big-name stars, a world-renowned author, an Academy Award-winning art director, enormous financial resources—enough, it would appear, to ensure a pretty good shot at critical acclaim.

**Guccione:** I'm not being naive, and I don't wish to sound paranoid, but I knew, or rather suspected, that the press would see me as a kind of dilettante upstart, an intruder. No matter how good the film was, they would see me, Bob Guccione, publisher of *Penthouse*, wheeler-dealer in sex and nudity, trying his hand at something new, pressing his luck in a medium that was alien to his experience, buying his way in . . . You know what I'm talking about. If you make an outstanding success in one area, people are somehow loath to see you do it in another.

**Penthouse:** Wouldn't the film speak for itself?

**Guccione:** In anyone else's case, perhaps, or if the film was small and modestly produced, yes. But I promised to produce a blockbuster, a landmark film. I promised that *Caligula* would fundamentally change the theatergoing public's perception of motion pictures. I said that it would foment changes within the industry itself. I really shot my mouth off, but I meant every word of it, and I still do.

**Penthouse:** Could the reaction of the critics have anything to do with the fact that you held no press screening in advance of the February opening of the film—that the critics had to stand in line with the rest of the public, that the temperature was 11 degrees Fahrenheit, and that they had to pay \$7.50 for their ticket, like everybody else?

**Guccione:** Let me put it this way—I don't think it helped matters very much, but then, I didn't care. I made *Caligula* for the masses, not for a few self-appointed elitists. Besides, every time I read a lousy review, I want the pleasure of knowing it cost the author \$7.50 to write it.

**Penthouse:** There has been a lot of talk about your decision to charge a ticket price of \$7.50. Many professionals believe this to be a tactical error in marketing and that it could topple whatever tentative interest or demand *Caligula* might have created.

**Guccione:** Apparently they were wrong. Professionalism is not necessarily a synonym for infallibility or privileged information, and since this film deviates in so many ways from every other film ever made, taking advice from conventional or so-called professional sources could be counterproductive. Besides, I don't know what you mean by "tentative interest." The public interest in *Caligula* is rabid rather than tentative.

**Penthouse:** Did you conduct some sort of market survey to determine the public's willingness to pay such a high price?

**Guccione:** Not at all. If you were to ask the public how they feel about paying more for any goods or service, they're bound to object, if only in principle. As in all things, however, value, rather than price, is the operative word. I have a personal theory that the whole system of motion picture ticket pricing is wrong and should be revised. As with any other product or service, certain economic principles must apply. If the cost of manufacturing and marketing a pair of shoes is \$50 and the retailer sells them for \$100, it might, depending on the quality, design, et cetera, be acceptable to the public. But if another pair of shoes cost only \$10 to manufacture, the retailer would be out of place—not to mention out of business—if he tried to get the same \$100 ticket.

Why should motion picture making be any different? The price of a ticket at the box office should bear some relationship to the cost of making the film. Why should a theater charge 3 or 4 dollars to see a film that might have cost \$500,000 or a million dollars to make and the same 3 or 4 dollars to see a film that cost 15 or 20 or even 40 million dollars to make? It can't be

right, and, furthermore, it doesn't happen in any other industry I can think of. A man must be paid for the work he does, and if filmmakers are to have a real incentive to make bigger and better films, they've got to have a real opportunity of getting their money back. It's a matter of immutable economic principle. Most people will pay more for damn near anything they want if the value is there, and the same people, including me, will bitch over nickles and dimes if we think we've been ripped off. In the case of *Caligula*, we've provided lots of value in lots of different ways.

**Penthouse:** In the quality and variety of explicit sexuality, you mean.

**Guccione:** Yes, among other things. No one doubts the importance of sex, and if you do it a little better than the next guy—accenting people rather than the pneumatic, nonstop grind of disembodied cocks and cunts—if you show more respect for everybody's favorite subject, that's value! There's considerable value in the production as well, in the costumes and sets, in the number and quality of artists and craftsmen; and from a purely visual point of view, few films have ever matched its opulence.

**Penthouse:** But the critics were generally unresponsive, preferring to deal with more obvious values, such as plot, authorship, sex, violence . . .

**Guccione:** That's *their* hang-up. Besides, what is a critic? What are his or her credentials? What gives *him* the right to make value judgments on behalf of the public taste? History is filled with their nameless gravestones, while the men and women they spent their lives attacking live on. How many great artists, writers, musicians, et cetera can you name? Now, how many of their critics can you recall? More often than not, he, the critic, is a failed artist, an incomplete personality, and by some idiotic cultural synergism, he survives by attaching himself to the arts. He is no more than a parasite, a remote observer . . . remote because he is on the outside of art, looking in.

**Penthouse:** That sounds rather bitter. Is it because of the critical reception that *Caligula* received, or have you always held that opinion?

**Guccione:** From the time I left school until the day I started *Penthouse*, I was a devoted painter. I lived and worked among other artists, and although, by choice, I never exhibited my work, many of my friends did. I was acutely aware of the social and economic impact of the art critics' reviews on their lives and work. And I grew to detest that fraudulent power. Like theater critics, their importance was magnified out of all proportion to their knowledge, their skills, and their sensitivity to art, and yet they could wipe out an entire career—financially, at least—with a single stroke of the pen. So what did they really know? They knew more about the practical history of art than any artist I ever knew, and they were particularly expert in that precious, pseudo-philosophical idiom by which art critics seem to communicate exclusively with art critics. But they couldn't paint, and they couldn't draw, and out of their rage and frustration their venomous credo grew: "If you can't join 'em . . . fight 'em."

In most respects, movie critics are similar, but they lack the power of the other two. The other two have widespread gaps in public comprehension going for them. They deal in illusions and metaphors. The more vapid the work, the more voluminous and incomprehensible the comment. But the movies—no! The medium is too popular, too accessible, too fundamental in its appeal, to rely on the tastes of increasingly higher authorities. Movie critics are insignificant by comparison. I don't know of one single example of any film that has succeeded or failed as a result of a critic's opinion.

**Penthouse:** A number of critics say privately that the real reason you decided not to hold press screenings was that you were afraid of critical reaction. Any truth in that?

**Guccione:** As I said before, I was prepared for it mentally and emotionally. I knew it was coming, and I knew how it was coming. But the lines outside the *Penthouse* East continue to swell. Every time the papers tell their readers how odious and decadent the film is, the lines get longer.

**Penthouse:** In that case, Rex Reed will have sold a lot of tickets. I think his review was the most vicious of all. Is there any bad

blood between you?

**Guccione:** Not that I can think of, unless the principles of staunch heterosexuality that I and my magazines appear to represent offend him. But who is Rex Reed? A noisy little man of no real talent or consequence, an intellectual runt whose gender seems to have gotten in the way of his judgment. He is like the perennial child: spoiled, grumpy, and rude, precocious in some ways and deficient in others . . . the child who refuses to respond to potty training and is therefore destined to go through life in a catharsis of oral-anal hysteria.

**Penthouse:** Would you say the problems you had with Gore Vidal arose for similar reasons?

**Guccione:** Not in a million years. Gore can be bitchy and almost always is. But next to Reed, Gore is a giant, an artist, an intellectual colossus. Gore is the real thing. Gore is precisely what Rex Reed would like to be but cannot. And that's the nub of Reed's problem; that's why so many of his reviews tend to be vicious and emotional rather than analytical and informative. As a critic, he reminds me of one of those tragic people who has to open his mouth in order to move his bowels.

**Penthouse:** But isn't Gore, in his own way, as critical of the film as Rex Reed and some of the others? Didn't he sue to have his name taken off the title?

**Guccione:** Yes and no! Gore did not sue, because he had no grounds to sue, and, yes, the title was originally Gore Vidal's *Caligula*. We agreed to drop his name from the title provided he give up his 10 percent share of the profits. This was over and above the 200-plus thousand we paid him to write the script, and his name was one of the things we were paying for. We continue to carry his credit in the main body of opening credits, however, because he is the author of the original screenplay, whether he likes it or not. **Penthouse:** Judging by some of the reports we've heard, the original idea to make a movie on the life of Caligula was Gore Vidal's. Is that completely accurate?

**Guccione:** No. The idea of making a film based on the life of Caligula was brought to Gore Vidal by producer Franco Rossellini, together with a treatment that had been written some time earlier by Franco's uncle, Roberto Rossellini. The original treatment shown to Vidal was merely a guide, a general idea to get Vidal interested in the subject. As you know, Vidal has a great interest in history and is a formidable historian in his own right.

**Penthouse:** Doesn't he insist that his original script was badly mutilated by you and the director and on those grounds disown it?

**Guccione:** Firstly, I never touched the script, although I spent many hours working with Gore during its original conceptualization and numerous subsequent revisions. The first few drafts were too

strong, particularly in terms of violence and homosexuality. It was far too long and called for too many scenes and too many sets. It would have cost \$30 or \$40 million to shoot the film the way Gore originally wrote it.

Of course there are script changes, but they are the same sort of changes that would have been made in any event, whether he continued to be associated with the film or not. Once a director gets his hands on a screenplay, there are many ways that he can interpret movements, events, activities, and attitudes on the part of the characters, because he uses images instead of words. Very often you can excise three or four pages of dialogue with a look, a gesture, or a single movement of the camera. And that, finally, is what motion picture direction is all about. It's the director who really makes the film, not the author.

**Penthouse:** Didn't Vidal later accuse you of making it pornographic?

**Guccione:** (Laughing) Actually, we had to remove a lot of the material that Gore had originally written into the script, so the film is now somewhat more sensual than the original version. In fact, just to give you one example, in the beginning—other than between Caligula and his sister, Drusilla—there were practically no heterosexual scenes at all. Every sex scene Vidal wrote was homosexual in content.

**Penthouse:** That would raise the question, of course, of whether Vidal thought that homosexual activity was that pervasive in the Roman Empire, to the exclusion of everything else. Did you ever discuss that with him?

**Guccione:** No, but knowing Gore, his answer would have been that homosexual activity was the province of the aristocracy and that it was the plebian society that engaged in heterosexuality.

**Penthouse:** You say that prior to its release Gore Vidal had not seen the movie, and yet among his comments—and I'll just quote you a few of them—is one that the movie's sex scenes are a "Copenhagen sex show," and that several of the sets, as he described it, resembled "the lobby of the Fontainebleau Hotel in Miami Beach." And in one widely noted comment on American television, he said, "*Caligula*—that's a Latin word meaning 'turkey.'" Yet you say that he had never seen the finished product.

**Guccione:** Let me take it a step further. Despite all his cries and protestations, Gore had never seen a single frame of the film. The trouble really began when Gore gave an interview to *Time* magazine. We had just signed Tinto Brass as director and Gore, with perfect Vidalian timing, told the reporter, in effect, that directors were really parasites living off the backs of authors and that the true author of the film should be the literary author, not the director, and that the director need only follow the simple stage directions as provided by the author of the screenplay.

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You can imagine the result. Tinto—a megalomaniac in his own right—blew his stack and threw Vidal out of the studio. I was upset for Gore, and yet, in the face of that ill-timed interview, I could understand Tinto's sense of outrage. I didn't want to take sides, but I had no choice. Gore's work was basically done, and Tinto's was about to begin. When you appoint a director, it's not unlike appointing the captain of a ship. Once the ship sets sail, the captain becomes its final and irrevocable authority. It's the law of the sea.

**Penthouse:** But at the same time, you must have had a sense that Vidal, given the enormity of his accomplishments to date, might have been fundamentally correct.

**Guccione:** Not really. You're tending to compare apples and oranges. Certainly, between the two, Vidal was by far the more prodigious talent. But the making of a motion picture is a collective effort, involving the input of a great number of artists and craftsmen and a great number of specialized talents. You need everything from choreographers to carpenters, from hairstylists to plumbers, from electricians and makeup artists and actors and cooks to architects, lawyers, accountants, voice coaches, dialogue directors, photographers, grips, set designers, and numberless others, equally important cogs in the creative wheel. And for one man to think that a film can be almost exclusively his work is a mistake. It's a team effort, and like every team, you need a captain. In the case of a motion picture, the captain, once again, is the director. If you don't like what he does, you remove him.

**Penthouse:** Was the critical problem, as Vidal later charged, that Brass was extensively revising his script as he went along?

**Guccione:** No.

**Penthouse:** Not true?

**Guccione:** No, not in the sense Vidal meant it. Tinto made revisions as he went along because it was necessary to the visual flow of the film. When a screenplay is reduced to a shooting script, certain changes inevitably take place. And no author in the world, no matter who he is or how important he is, can say, when he submits a screenplay to a director, that the screenplay must remain inviolate. It simply doesn't apply, because each of them sees the action from a different vantage point: the author sees it verbally; the director sees it visually. And since a motion picture is a visual rather than a verbal experience, guess who wins—it's like the difference between television and radio. Although the two entertainment media are not that dissimilar, there are vast changes and differences in bringing the work to the public.

**Penthouse:** Still, at that point, you seemed to be acting more as a referee than a producer.

**Guccione:** You're absolutely right. What was happening was not my idea of how a

movie should be made, nor was it my idea of the producer's role. But the real problems, the day-to-day battle of the egos, the petty squabbles, the temperaments, the ever increasing budget, fell on the shoulders of Franco Rossellini.

**Penthouse:** Wasn't Franco your co-producer?

**Guccione:** Yes, but he was more than that. Franco Rossellini is a man of unusual talent and great charm. He's the nephew of the late Roberto Rossellini and Ingrid Bergman. Roberto, along with Fellini, De Sica, and others, created the Italian motion-picture industry out of the rubble of World War II. Franco's father, Renzo, is one of the most celebrated musician-composers in Europe. A very talented family. But Franco's art lies somewhere beyond the applied variety . . . more like a Diaghilev than a Nijinsky . . . a ringmaster with an impeccable nose for public taste. Franco was the line producer on *Caligula*. He assembled most of the players, artists, and craftsmen, handled the money, and effectively ran the day-to-day operations of the company. Franco is not a producer in the Dino De Laurentiis tradition. Dino is a superprofessional. He thinks and acts with computerlike logic, a machine creating art. Franco is a window dresser: fussy, temperamental, but very insightful, creating clever relationships with the right alchemy of people and talent and then dealing with them as one deals with a classroom full of unruly, temperamental, and spoiled children. He does this, among other things, extremely well.

**Penthouse:** Let's return to the genesis of the movie. How did you get involved in making this particular picture? You had never made a movie up to that point, right?

**Guccione:** Well, the Penthouse organization had never produced a film from scratch, although we had been involved in other people's films by way of investment.

**Penthouse:** What kind of films?

**Guccione:** We were the single largest investor in such films as *Chinatown*, *The Longest Yard*, and *The Day of the Locust*. And, as you know, two of those—*Chinatown* and *The Longest Yard*—made a lot of money. *The Day of the Locust* did not. But just making money on our investment and being peripherally associated with filmmaking was not terribly satisfying to a creative organization. I really wanted to make my own kind of film, a film that would be memorable, one that I felt could be as new and as significant and as revolutionary to motion pictures as *Penthouse* has become to magazine publishing. So, with that intent, I sought and obtained both Franco's and Gore's agreement to weld scenes of explicit sexuality and violence to an otherwise establishmentarian project—i.e., big stars, big budget, et cetera, et cetera.

**Penthouse:** But here, it seems to me, an interesting problem begins to surface.

Some people have said: look, here's Bob Guccione, a guy who, despite the fact that he really doesn't have to anymore, continues to take pictures for his own magazine. So wouldn't you have the same situation if Bob Guccione went into movie production? Wouldn't it just be out of the question for him to let everybody else take the pictures? Wouldn't he, at some point or other, want to get involved in the visual part of it, visuals being his strength?

**Guccione:** I never thought of it that way, but I suppose you're right.

**Penthouse:** You ultimately did get very deeply involved, perhaps more involved than you had meant to be in the beginning. But how much of that was by design, and how much of it was by accident?

**Guccione:** Good question. I never intended to involve myself, certainly not in the actual shooting, until I saw the way Brass had mishandled and brutalized the film's sexuality. No matter what instructions I gave him, no matter how many times we discussed a scene and agreed on its interpretation, Brass would go out of his way to do the opposite. When I was in Rome and present at the studio, he would work within the parameters we had originally agreed. The minute I left Rome or even turned my back, he would go thundering off on his own.

**Penthouse:** You mean you had moments of real doubt?

**Guccione:** Oh, yes, I had moments of real doubt, plenty of them! Hell, we'd look at the rushes and realize that we were talking about one kind of movie and Brass was shooting another. Let me tell you how ridiculous it got. When it came to casting certain senators and noblemen, he would deliberately recruit them from a pool of ex-convicts, thieves, and political anarchists that he happened to keep in touch with. That was his sense of humor. The Penthouse Pets were kept in the background and, whenever possible, out of sight. If Franco and I hadn't appeared on the set from time to time, our girls would have been lost forever. It was not uncommon for Brass to have the girls costumed, made up, and on location at five-thirty in the morning and then have them stand around all day in the bitter cold, only to be sent home at midnight without spending a single minute before the cameras. Whenever possible, he would use old women—fat, ugly, and wrinkled old women—to play the kind of sensual roles we had provided the Pets for. He thought that was funny, too.

**Penthouse:** What about the sets? Wasn't there some kind of a problem between Brass and Danilo Donati?

**Guccione:** Danilo is a major talent. If he is difficult and temperamental, you learn to live with it. That's part of the price you pay for his art, and by the best industry standards, his art is unique. Danilo Donati is the real star of *Caligula*. He not only designed the sets, but he did the cos-

tumes, jewelry, hair styles, wigs, and makeup. Next to him, Brass is a crude and uncomprehending lout. Despite the fact that he shot approximately 120 miles of film—enough, incidentally, to make the original version of *Ben Hur* about 50 times over—he ignored anywhere up to half the sets and props that Danilo had created. Naturally, Danilo was heartbroken, but Franco and I were wild. With a little planning on the director's part, we could have saved millions.

**Penthouse:** Didn't you once suggest that Brass had actually tried to sabotage the film?

**Guccione:** As strange as it may sound, it's true. It took us some time to understand that we were up against a very sick guy.

In the beginning, I found him—or at least I thought that I had found him—cooperative. He seemed to understand what we were trying to achieve, and we offered him something that comes to a relatively unknown director once, if at all, in a lifetime: a chance to make a film of colossal proportions and also an opportunity to exercise an almost free hand artistically.

**Penthouse:** But why, with all the money you had to spend, didn't you choose someone more reliable, someone with a track record for honesty and professionalism?

**Guccione:** For several reasons. I had consulted with other directors, including people like John Huston and Lina Wertmuller. Huston was interested in a similar project I once had, but his agent became greedy and difficult to negotiate with. Lina was another problem. She loved the idea of making *Caligula*, but she wanted to get rid of Gore and change the title to *Lina Wertmuller's Caligula* ... a bit of a mouthful and one that failed to take into consideration the fact that I had already shelled out damn near a quarter of a million dollars to get Vidal's version on paper. She also had the rather improbable notion that Jack Nicholson should play Caligula.

In the end, Tinto was my idea. He was cutting *Madame Kitty* when I met him, and I had seen a couple of reels and felt that he had a certain raw but workable talent. He was insufficiently known to be too demanding, and I honestly felt that the magnitude of our project would keep him in line.

**Penthouse:** You mean to say that you didn't check him out—you didn't talk to other producers who knew him and had worked with him before?

**Guccione:** That's right. I hired him blindly, over lunch. He appeared to grasp our rather difficult concept at once. And it was obvious that he didn't have any emotional hang-ups about sex. Quite the contrary. I later learned, of course, that he had given his last two producers the same kind of problems he gave us. But it was too late. The die, as they say, was cast.

**Penthouse:** How did he get along with McDowell and the others?

**Guccione:** Fine. He and McDowell were in each other's pocket. O'Toole disliked him on sight, and I don't think Gielgud

cared very much one way or the other. Sir John did his thing without a murmur ... without intrigue and without problems. He was a complete gentleman throughout, never demanding and never complaining. Just goes to show you that real talent can survive without benefit of an overbearing ego. Helen Mirren was the same. She is an important talent ... much bigger than either McDowell or O'Toole. It's a shame her part as Cae-sonia wasn't more demanding.

**Penthouse:** Did Peter O'Toole give you any problems?

**Guccione:** I don't think I ever saw him sober. He doesn't drink anymore, or at least he wasn't drinking then, but he was strung out on something. From time to time it took a little longer than usual to get him on the set, and when you've got six or seven hundred people standing around, his little habits can become god-damn expensive. At the end of the film he became a real pain in the ass. He wouldn't revoice his own part. He held everyone up by constantly breaking appointments or just not showing up at all. Dubbing studios and the professional people that go with them are expensive and difficult to reserve. Finally, after chasing him halfway around the world, we nailed him in Canada, and one of our executives dragged him in front of a mike. It wasn't easy, and it cost us a lot of unnecessary money. On top of which, he gave interviews to the press, condemning the film he had never even seen rushes of. Nice guy! He took our money—and then tells the world the film is so bad it'll probably never see the light of day.

**Penthouse:** And McDowell? How did you get along with him?

**Guccione:** Malcolm is another story. He's a fine actor but a shallow person. He and Tinto were inseparable ... not because Malcolm particularly liked or respected him but because he was easy for Malcolm to manipulate.

**Penthouse:** Why do you say shallow?

**Guccione:** Cheap is a better word ... stingy! Stingier than anyone I have ever known. In my not inconsiderable experience with people, Malcolm McDowell holds the all-time record. I don't think he ever paid for a cup of coffee. At one point he took a bunch of people out to dinner to celebrate an Anglo-Italian football match that England had won. He took them to the most expensive place in town, ordered champagne, and made a big show of being the generous host. In the end he stuck the choreographer with the check, saying that he had forgotten to bring enough cash. Several weeks later the choreographer, a relatively poor and modest man, came to us and asked if we could repay the money Malcolm owed him. He said that Malcolm told him to collect the debt from the production because he had taken the Pets as well and they were part of Penthouse. He did that on more than one occasion, but in blatant

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Brass shot  
approximately 120 miles  
of film—enough,  
incidentally, to make the  
original version of  
*Ben Hur* about 50 times over.



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7

and obvious ways that would have mortified anyone else.

At the end of the production, according to industry tradition, he gave his dresser—an elderly woman who used to bathe and dress him every day—a cheap, second-hand silver pendant with her name misspelled. It couldn't have cost five dollars, and when she pointed out the mistake and gave it back to him, he accepted it cheerfully. He then offered her his signet ring from the film. A worthless prop which she again graciously refused, saying that she couldn't accept it, as it belonged to the company. "Never mind," he said, "you keep it; I'll take care of the company." The poor woman was speechless. In all the years she had dressed stars like Robert Taylor, Kirk Douglas, Bob Mitchum, et cetera, et cetera, she had never seen anything to equal either his cheapness or the direct and unblushing way he carried it off.

**Penthouse:** Any more horror stories? How about the Pets and the "extra scenes" attributed to you and Giancarlo Lui?

**Guccione:** The Pets were the saving grace. Without them, I would have been lost. They were wonderful. They took everything Brass could throw at them, and they held their ground. The production was divided into two camps: the Penthouse people, including our girls, on one side, and Brass and his mob on the other. But we won . . . if you can imagine such a lunatic competition in the middle of a multi-million-dollar production.

We finished shooting on Christmas Eve, and everyone went home. Giancarlo and I slipped back to Rome a few weeks later, bringing 11 or 12 girls with us. We hired a skeleton crew, snuck back into the studios at night, raided the prop room and created out of the remaining odds and ends a few little sets. The boat was still intact, and we reproped that as well. During the day we cast about 30 more people, some of whom had already worked in the film. We wanted them for continuity purposes.

We lit, staged, directed, and photographed the scenes ourselves. I had never even touched a 35 mm motion picture camera before, but I took one over and started to shoot. I was on one camera and Giancarlo on the other. We filmed the famous lesbian scene between Anneka and Lori for two nights running. We worked for hours nonstop, and the crew never complained once. They were some of the same people who had worked for Brass, and they knew how we had been ripped off and welcomed this rather unusual opportunity to make amends.

The girls were marvelous. They worked under difficult conditions, and there, in the huge, semidarkened stages of Dear Studios, Anneka di Lorenzo and Lori Wagner contributed something beautiful and lasting to the history of motion pictures.

**Penthouse:** It sounds wacky. I've never

heard of a producer sneaking back into the studio at night to reshoot scenes his director either failed to do or did improperly.

**Guccione:** We had to. We had no choice. We worked four or five nights in all and put together enough material to make the difference. We had to do it that way because of the peculiar laws governing a director's rights in Europe. We even had to sneak the negative—all 120 miles of it—out of the country and into England. Don't ask me how we did it; that's another horror story. Had anything happened to it—the negative, I mean—all would have been lost. Imagine . . . the entire budget of the film, all 17.5 million dollars' worth was wrapped up in those cans of celluloid. That's all that was left of the money; it was all there . . . in those tin cans.

**Penthouse:** What happened when you got the negative to England?

**Guccione:** The first thing we did was to fire Brass. That's when all the lawsuits started. Tinto was suing us, we were suing Tinto, Tinto was suing Gore, and Gore was threatening to sue everybody else.

The negative was hidden away in musty vaults in cans marked, "The Pecos Kid," "My Son, My Son," and other such names. Technicolor, which had been doing our printing, suddenly threatened to throw us out lock, stock, and barrel, and we had to make another midnight raid on the vaults, removing the negative once again (a thing you're never supposed to do, because of the delicate and irreplaceable quality of the celluloid itself). This time we scattered it about in different places, fearing that Technicolor would tip off the police that under British law, we were making an illegal film. By day, of course, we were editing the work print at Twickenham Studios as if nothing had happened.

**Penthouse:** What next?

**Guccione:** The British unions got into the act. Word went out that no one was to touch the film; no one was to work on it. We were wrapping up the editing and began to worry about the negative again. But there was nowhere left to go. Since the unions started sniffing around, we really began to worry. They would know how to find it, and we knew the sanctimonious bastards were looking in earnest.

Another midnight raid, only this time we took it out of the country. We took it to Paris, made a few prints, and brought the whole thing (hopefully) to its final resting place in New York.

**Penthouse:** And you opened *Caligula* on February 1, at your own theater, the Penthouse East.

**Guccione:** Where, I'm happy to say, it's broken every standing box-office record at the theater—we took over the former Trans-Lux East.

**Penthouse:** What next?

**Guccione:** Don't know . . . But it's bound to be interesting. Oh

Stingy!  
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